

OLDER AND WISER: Regular exercise essential for healthy aging

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Recently, along with a popular fitness tracking device, I received a birthday card with the inside caption reading “If you rest, you rust.”

It led me to think about the role of exercise in supporting the healthy aging of seniors.

The Public Health Agency of Canada (PHAC) says that exercise improves your balance, reduces falls and injuries, helps you stay independent longer and helps prevent heart disease, stroke, osteoporosis, type 2 diabetes, some cancers and premature death. A Health Canada paper from November 2001 suggests that “chronic inactivity is associated with negative health outcomes such as premature death, chronic diseases, illness and disability, as well as reduced quality of life and independence.”

In a report called Raising the Profile of the Community-Based Seniors’ Services Sector in B.C.: A Review of the Literature, the authors point out that despite widely accepted health benefits, seniors are not getting the exercise they need.

They write that the Canadian Physical Activity Guidelines recommend a minimum of 150 minutes of moderate to vigorous physical activity a week in order to accrue health benefits. But they cite a Statistics Canada survey that found that only 12 per cent of Canadians aged 60-79 were meeting these guidelines.

Some of you may already be exercising. But are you getting enough or the right kind of exercise?

Research suggests a number of different approaches to exercising. PHAC suggests taking part in at least 2½ hours of moderate to vigorous intensity aerobic activity each week.

The Canadian Society for Exercise Physiology (CSEP) says to achieve health benefits and improve functional abilities, adults aged 65 years and older should accumulate at least 150 minutes of moderate to vigorous intensity aerobic physical activity

per week in bouts of 10 minutes or more. Both PHAC and CSEP suggest at least two sessions a week of muscle and bone strengthening to help with posture and balance.

Whatever fitness target you set for yourself, it is important to get moving. If you have been an inactive senior, check with your health-care professional first. Start slowly and build your activity level until you are comfortable. PHAC suggests increasing your activity level 10 minutes at a time.

On the North Shore, seniors should have no problem finding an exercise program or class that suits their needs. They can find an activity such as swimming, cycling, or dancing. They can look for group activities like badminton or lawn bowling. If a senior has a physical disability they can find chair exercise classes (most seniors centres have them).

There are classes for balance and osteoporosis as well. If you are not interested in a seniors program, grab a friend or family member for a walk – it's free. I know in our rainy weather it's difficult to walk outdoors, but mall walking is a good replacement activity. If you are able, take the stairs instead of the elevator, and maybe walk to your next lunch engagement.

Choose a parking spot farther away from a store, incorporating a walk into your shopping trip.

For seniors who have been active, maybe shake it up a bit and find another activity you have not tried. Anyone for a Zumba class or pickle ball game? Come on everyone, let's move not rust away.

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